DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 897 HE 029 901

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TITLE The Social Construction of "Visible Minority" for Students of Chinese Origin.
INSTITUTION York Univ., Toronto (Ontario). Inst. for Social Research.
REPORT NO ISBN-1-55014-236-4
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 25p.; For a related document, see HE 029 903.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affirmative Action; *College Students; *Ethnic Status; Focus Groups; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Minority Groups; Public Policy; *Racial Attitudes; *Racial Identification; Student Surveys
IDENTIFIERS Canada; *Chinese Canadians; Visible Minority (Canada); York University ON

ABSTRACT

A survey and focus group study with students of Chinese origin at York University in Ontario (Canada) examined their attitudes toward the concept of "visible minority." Surveys of students conducted in 1992-94, as well as three focus group sessions conducted with 26 students of Chinese origin, have indicated that large numbers of students who spoke Chinese in their homes while growing up did not consider themselves members of a visible minority group. Focus group results indicated that many Chinese origin students did not rely exclusively on physiological characteristics such as color to ascribe visible minority status. Accent, perceived power of the group in question, numbers in the population, self-presentation, and cultural assertiveness were all seen as relevant criteria. Many students regarded visible minority as a derogatory term, and some opposed affirmative action programs because of fear of backlash, aversion to reverse discrimination, belief in merit as a basis for hiring, and ethnic pride. Overall, the results suggest that to a large number of Chinese origin students the term visible minority has a different meaning than the one researchers and policymakers assume. (MDM)

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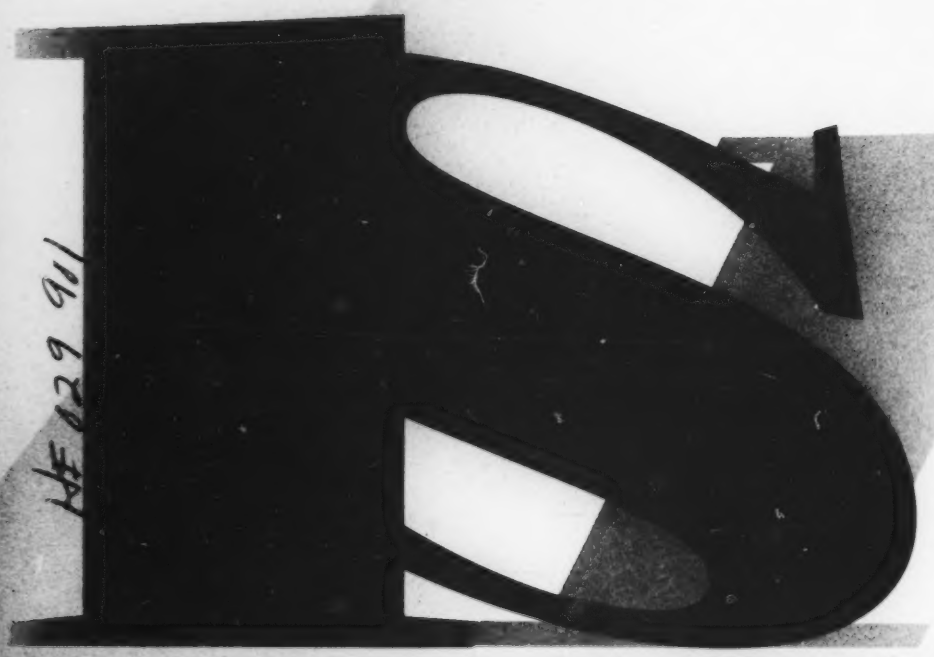
INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF 'VISIBLE MINORITY' FOR STUDENTS OF CHINESE ORIGIN

J. PAUL GRAYSON
WITH TAMMY CHI AND DARLA RHYNE



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The Social Construction of 'Visible Minority' for Students of Chinese Origin

J. Paul Grayson with Tammy Chi and Darla Rhyne

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Published by: **Institute for Social Research**
York University

ISBN: 1-55014-236-4

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Foreword

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The following is a report of general interest to non-specialist readers.

Acknowledgements

A number of individuals at the ISR contributed to various phases of the research on which the following report is based. In no particular order we would like to thank: David Northrup, John Tibert, Greg Hanson, and Anne Oram. We would also like to thank Bill Bruce for his assistance with name generation and Linda Grayson for helpful comments made on an early draft of the report.

Summary

In recent years, the non-white population of Metropolitan Toronto has grown considerably. As a result of changing demographics such as these, the federal and provincial governments have adopted measures intended to remove any systemic barriers for 'visible minorities' in a number areas such as employment.

Researchers and policy makers tend to assume that the term 'visible minority' is easily understood as one that applies to, among others, all non-whites; however, a number of surveys conducted at York University indicate that large numbers of students who spoke Chinese in their homes while growing up do not consider themselves members of a visible minority group. In addition, those who do not self-identify as visible minorities tend to have few friends who are visible minorities. By way of contrast, students who do consider themselves visible minorities have large numbers of visible minority friends.

In focus group meetings that were held to determine why certain students of Chinese origin do not consider themselves members of visible minority groups a considerable amount of important information was brought to light. First, in ascribing visible minority status, many Chinese origin students do not rely exclusively on physiological characteristics such as colour. Accent, perceived power of the group in question, numbers in the population, self-presentation, and cultural assertiveness were all seen as relevant criteria. Second, students of Chinese origin used the same yardsticks when determining whether or not they were members of a visible minority group. Third, many students regarded visible minority as a derogatory term. Fourth, some students opposed affirmative action programs because of: fear of backlash and aversion to reverse discrimination; belief in merit as a basis for hiring; self-esteem and/or ethnic pride; and because of feared negative organizational consequences. Overall, the results of the research suggest that to large numbers of Chinese origin students the term 'visible minority' has a different meaning than the one researchers and policy makers assume.

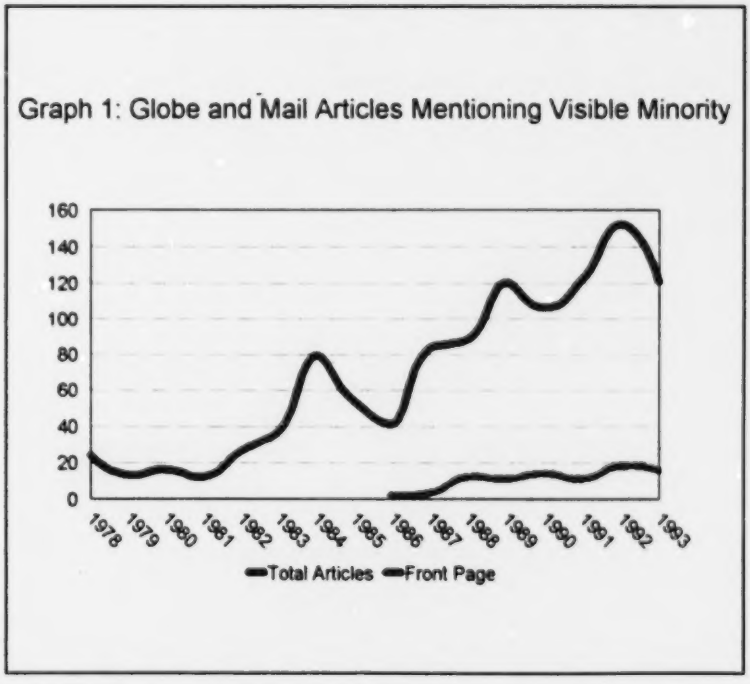
Efforts are currently under way to determine the meaning of 'visible minority' for black and white students. Independent of the outcome of such research, the findings from the study of Chinese origin students suggest that the term should be used with caution.

Introduction

In recent years the number of non-white immigrants and refugees to Toronto has grown substantially. For example, in 1986, 17% of the population of the metropolitan area was classified as 'visible minority'; by 1991 the figure was approximately 25%. By 1996 and 2001 the numbers of visible minorities who will reside in the Toronto area will make up an estimated 35% and 45% respectively of the total population (Samuel, 1992:34-35). Among visible minorities individuals of Chinese origin are likely to remain the largest single group.

In view of these changing demographics, it is not surprising that the term 'visible minority' has come into wide-spread use. For example, as shown in Graph 1, the number of Globe and Mail articles in which the term was used grew from approximately 20 in 1978 to 120 in 1993. While the number of page one stories mentioning visible minorities has increased from zero in 1985 to approximately 20 in 1993, the increase has been less spectacular than for total articles.

Changing immigration and refugee patterns have resulted in provincial and federal government initiatives to promote a variety of equity measures (Abella, 1984). In Ontario, for example, the NDP government supports equity legislation that would have far reaching implications for new hirings, particularly in the public sector. At the federal level, in 1986, Bill C62, an Act Respecting Employment Equity, was passed by the House of Commons. Its objective was "to achieve equality in the workplace so that no person shall be denied employment opportunities or benefits for reasons unrelated to ability" (quoted in Boxhill, nd:1). More specifically, the Act is designed to deal with systemic barriers that may be encountered by women, aboriginal peoples, persons with



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disabilities, and individuals who in terms of colour or race are visible minority members.

The Act requires that some federally regulated employers and those wishing to conduct business with the federal government implement employment equity measures and annually report to Parliament on their results (Boxhill, nd:2). Given this requirement, it is not surprising that the 'internal census' has been a frequently used means of acquiring information on the composition of an organization's workforce. In such censuses, it is common practice to ask individuals whether or not they consider themselves members of a visible minority group.

The difficulty with this approach is that it ignores the fact that phenomena such as race, ethnicity, colour, and visible minority are social constructs - they do not exist in some 'objective' sense. As a result, while the researcher may have a clear idea of what he or she means by, for example, visible minority, the individuals being studied may have a different idea. The general process operative here has been identified by Figueroa in a discussion of ethnicity (1991:55-56).

> Any 'in-group' identification at least implicitly involves the identifying, categorizing and defining of an 'out-group' even if only an undifferentiated one. But this other-identification does not necessarily tally with the way those others identify themselves. When we look at others and refer to them as this or that 'ethnic group', we are involved in an interpretive process which does not necessarily respond to the 'objective facts' nor to the interpretive process of those others.

What Figueroa says of ethnicity applies equally to 'visible minority'.[1] Those we classify as visible minorities, for whatever reason, may not regard themselves as visible minorities. As a result, if we pursue a line of inquiry that invites

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[1] There is an extensive literature on 'minority groups' and 'ethnic groups' which covers such issues as minority-majority social process and interaction patterns; integration; assimilation; acculturation; cultural retention; identity; and marginalization. The literature dealing with the meaning of 'visible minority' for those to whom the term is applied, however, appears to be small and limited in scope. A key word search in Yorkline, a record of York University's library holdings, produced only 16 references. A brief examination of Sociofile, a listing of abstracts of articles from sociological journals, produced fewer than ten items in the category 'visible minority'. Many of these references deal with government policy and implementation of equity measures concerning visible minorities. In these, the definition of visible minority appears to be taken for granted.

individuals to self-identify as visible minorities, we do not know if researchers and those under study are using the term in the same way.

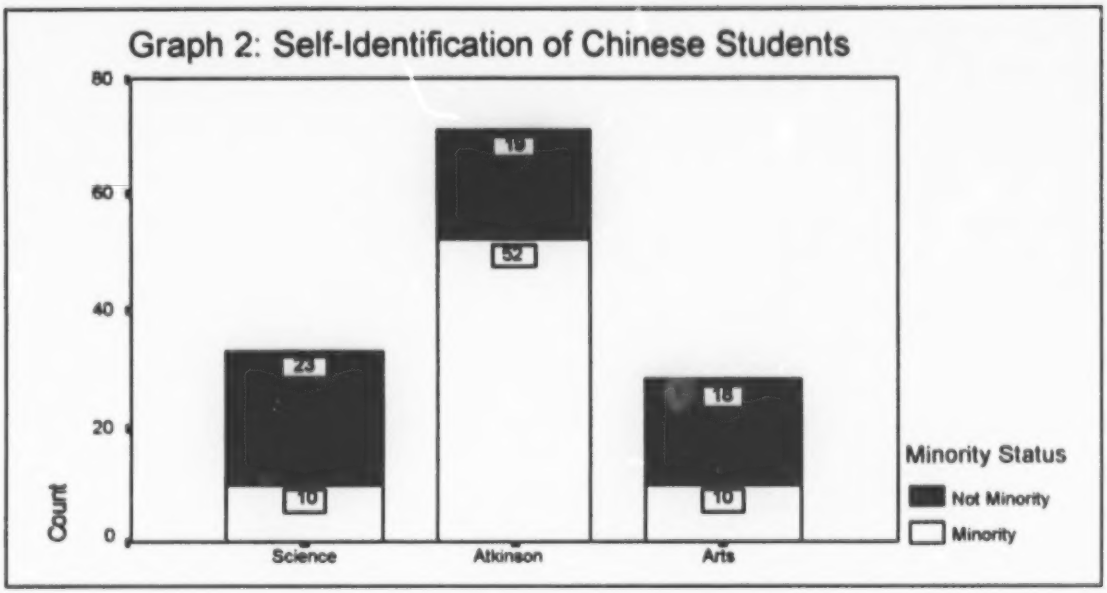
On some occasions, in an effort to side-step problems such as these, researchers may ask questions such as: "Are you, *by virtue of your race or colour*, in a visible minority in Canada?" (Boxhill, nd:94). Unfortunately, if the respondent were, for example, to regard 'visible minority' as a derogatory term there may be a reluctance to link colour with visible minority status, independent of the intent of the researcher asking the question. In essence, while the individual may think of him/herself as non-white, he or she may still not self-identify as a visible minority. Possibilities such as these should be borne in mind when conducting mail or phone censuses of organizations or when carrying out surveys of any kind.

In the following pages, in verification of the foregoing, information will be presented from a number of surveys indicating that a substantial percentage of individuals of Chinese origin do not regard themselves as members of a visible minority group. Moreover, it will be shown that for many students of Chinese origin visible minorities include individuals usually viewed as white. In making these points light will be shed on how the term visible minority is used in everyday conceptualizations of students of Chinese origin and why the term is problematic for researchers.

The Surveys

In 1992 the Institute for Social Research embarked on a program of student studies at York University. Starting in September 1992, to date, surveys have been carried out of students entering Science (September 1992), Arts (August 1993), and Atkinson (the evening operation of York University, August 1993). Follow-up surveys of Science students were conducted in November 1992, March 1993, and March 1994. Similar follow-up surveys of Arts and Atkinson students were carried out in March 1994. For each survey focus groups were conducted at times that corresponded to the surveys.

The intent of the studies was to determine a number of outcomes of the university experience at York and to identify the conditions that might be conducive to the realization of such outcomes. As a result it was by pure chance that in the first survey of students in Science a crosstabulation was run in which language spoken in the home ("What language did you usually speak at home while you were growing up?") was related to visible minority self-identification ("Do you consider yourself to be a member of a visible minority group?). When this was done, as can be seen in the first column of Graph 2, only 10 out of 33



students, or 30% of Science students who had spoken Chinese at home, defined themselves as members of a visible minority group. Data collected from follow-up surveys of Science students in November 1992 and March 1993 revealed a similar pattern.

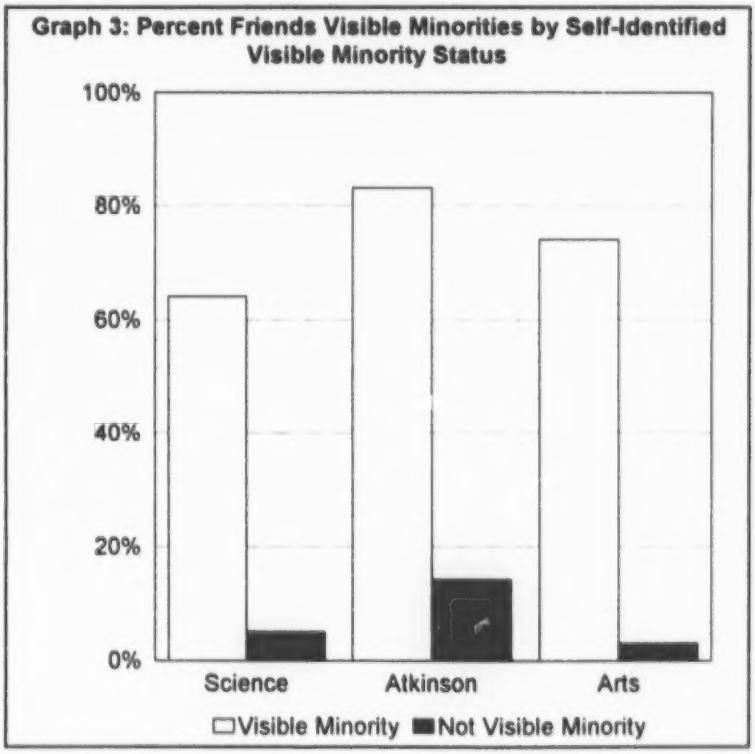
In order to determine if this phenomenon was peculiar to Science students, when data became available, similar analyses were conducted of students responding to the Arts and Atkinson surveys of August 1993. As can be seen from the graph, 52 out of 71 Atkinson students who spoke Chinese at home - 73% - self-identified as minority group members. In Arts, only 10 out of 28, or 36%, identified themselves as members of a visible minority group.

Although the absolute numbers are small, the implications are clear: particularly in Science and Arts, substantial numbers of Chinese origin students do not consider themselves members of a visible minority group. Moreover, analyses not shown here suggest that self-identification is not a function of gender or birthplace; however, age may be a factor in self-identification: in general, Atkinson students are older than those in either Science or Arts. Nonetheless, it is surprising that only 73% of Chinese origin Atkinson students viewed themselves as having visible minority status.

In an effort to determine if this pattern of self-identification is a recent phenomenon, ISR's archives were culled for other surveys that might shed light on the matter. The only one of relevance was conducted in 1991 and involved 1,678

York students in all years from all parts of the University. In this study, a relatively large number of students who spoke Chinese at home, 84%, regarded themselves as visible minority members.[2] While the numbers of Chinese origin students in this survey who regarded themselves as visible minority members is larger than in subsequent surveys, there is still a sufficiently large percentage who self-define as non-minorities to suggest that in 1991 it could not be taken for granted that Chinese origin students would self-identify as visible minorities.

Given the evidence, four lines of further inquiry are suggested. First, is the tendency of large numbers of particularly Science and Arts students not to self-identify as visible minorities a recent phenomenon? Unfortunately, there is no way of providing an answer to this question. Second, in the recent surveys, attention has focused on students entering first year. Is minority group identification something that will increase as a result of maturation and/or exposure to a university climate in which minority group status is a salient political issue? Planned follow-up surveys will provide an answer to this second question. For the time being it should be pointed out, however, that the survey of Science students conducted at the end of their first year yielded self-identification patterns similar to those already discussed. Third, are other non-white students likely to self-identify as visible minorities? This crucial question is already the subject of further investigation. Fourth, do white students' notions of 'visible minority' correspond to those of non-white students.



A long tradition of sociological research has established that individuals' perceptions and categorizations are related to their social interactions (Berger and Luckman, 1967;

[2] David Northrup, Survey Manager at ISR, brought this survey to my attention.

Frankenberg, 1993) As a result, once it had been established that not all students of Chinese origin regarded themselves as visible minorities, survey data were examined to determine if there were any differences in the friendship patterns of self-identified visible minority Chinese origin students compared to those who did not regard themselves as minorities. When this step was taken, it was clear that there were substantial differences based on the self-identification.

As can be seen from Graph 3, in Science, Atkinson, and Arts, students of Chinese origin who view themselves as members of a visible minority group have far more friends who they feel also consider themselves visible minorities than students who do not self-identify in this way (differences are statistically significant). For example, self-identified visible minority Chinese students in Science stated that 64% of their friends are also visible minorities. By way of comparison, only 5% of the friends of those who do not regard themselves as visible minorities are classified as visible minorities. Differences for Atkinson and Arts students are similar.

While such data are interesting, they are difficult to interpret at this point. Do students who view themselves as visible minorities self-select other visible minorities as friends? Do individuals of Chinese origin whose friends are not visible minorities come to regard themselves in the same way? Do Chinese origin students' views of visible minorities in some cases preclude classifications on the basis of, in this case, Chinese origin? We do not know. Nonetheless, these are important questions: they get to the heart of how the notion of visible minority is socially constructed.

Focus Group Follow-Up

In an effort to deal with these and other questions, as well as to provide information on the meaning of the term 'visible minority', a research strategy was developed that involved conducting focus group interviews with 'racially' identifiable students at York University. As a first step, students of Chinese origin were divided into those who self-identified as visible minorities and those who did not. Further divisions were made between, on the one hand, Science and Arts students, and, on the other, Atkinson students (who on average were older than those in Science and Arts).

The original intent was to conduct separate group meetings of self-identified minority Chinese from each of Science/Arts and Atkinson. Additional meetings were scheduled for Chinese origin students who did not self-identify as minorities from each of Science/Arts and Atkinson. Unfortunately, it proved impossible to

recruit Atkinson students of Chinese origin who do not view themselves as visible minorities for focus group meetings.

Overall, 26 students participated in three focus groups. Of these, approximately one half were female. The female facilitator for all group discussions was of Chinese origin.

Visible Minority Groups

Knowing that many Chinese students did not define themselves as visible minorities, an important objective of the focus groups was to determine who students of Chinese origin would regard as members of visible minority groups. As a result, early in the meetings, before specific groups were discussed, participants were asked to list on a piece of paper all groups that in their view could be considered visible minorities. The results of this exercise are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Visible Minority Groups

	Number	Percent
Indian	17	13.7%
Korean	14	11.3%
Chinese	13	10.5%
Japanese	12	9.7%
Black	10	8.1%
Native Indian	6	4.8%
Greek	4	3.2%
Middle Eastern	4	3.2%
Iranian	4	3.2%
Philipino	4	3.2%
ESL	3	2.5%
Iraqui	3	2.4%
South/Central American	3	2.4%
Russian	3	2.4%
African	2	1.6%
Italian	2	1.6%
Pakistani	2	1.6%
Ukrainian	2	1.6%
Aboriginal	1	.8%
Cambodians	1	.8%
Czech	1	.8%
Jamaican	1	.8%
Jews	1	.8%
Latino	1	.8%
Latvian	1	.8%
Malaysian	1	.8%
Nepalese	1	.8%
Polish	1	.8%
Portuguese	1	.8%
Tamil	1	.8%
Spanish	1	.8%
Thai	1	.8%
USSR	1	.8%
Yugoslavian	1	.8%
TOTAL	124	99.7%

As seen from the table, in total, the participants in all three groups made 124 identifications. The first four listed groups - Indian, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese - were all Asian and totalled 45.2% of all groups mentioned. Not too much significance should be attached to the observation that Chinese was only the third most frequently mentioned group as some Chinese participants may have taken their own minority status for granted. Perhaps of more importance is that in the group made up of students who in the survey stated that they were not visible minority members, only one mention was given to Chinese when visible minority groups were listed.

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While a wide range of groups were mentioned as having visible minority characteristics, it is important to note that three mentions were made of the fact that because of accents all individuals who had English as a second language should be viewed as members of visible minorities. Also, a number of groups such as Greeks, Russians, Italians, Czechs, Jews, Poles, Portuguese, Yugoslavians, and Spaniards, who might be thought of as white, comprised 13% of all mentions.

Rationale for Visible Minority Classification

In a discussion following the listing of individuals who could be considered visible minorities, to a limited degree, lists were extended. From these discussions it was apparent that the rationale for characterizing individuals as visible minority group members fell into six often overlapping categories:

- Colour and physical characteristics
- Accent
- Power
- Number in the population
- Self presentation
- Cultural assertiveness

Colour and Physical Characteristics

Colour as a basis of classification was perhaps the most frequently chosen rationale. As one male student put it, "I judge whether you are minority according to your colour."[3] Classifications based on colour, however, were not simple trichotomies of Black, White, and Yellow. For example, although one female student believed that minorities were "people who are not Caucasian," a male student thought some Greeks and Portuguese qualify as visible minorities because "some of them have olive complexion."

Accent

For many students, accent made many individuals as visible as colour. According to one female student, who linked accent and colour, a visible minority is "a group of people that can be identify [sic] into according to the colour or the native language."

Another female student saw a connection between colour and accent as each could be used as a basis of discrimination. "As soon as the term visible minority

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[3] Although the first language of many students was not English, all quotations are presented verbatim.

comes to mind," she felt "it's imply [sic] something of discrimination. Eastern Europeans," she explained, "in terms of language, they're not speaking English better than most of us. In terms of reading and writing," she argued, "I think they're even worse because I encounter a lot of these Polish people. Even Italians, they don't read English better than us do." Despite these facts, the woman complained that, "when the media reporting on something, they're not pinpointing them [the Poles and Italians], but only pinpointing on the Asian people because of our colour, or maybe because of our way of the lifestyle or something." As was true for many others, this woman believed that the term 'visible minority' had a negative connotation.

Power

The notion that visible minority status implied lack of power in economic and political realms was clear in the words of a number of meeting participants. For example, one woman, who did not regard herself as a visible minority even though she was of Chinese origin explained that: "I don't consider Chinese as being visible minority in this place, but one of, like, the greater number. The Chinese here," she explained, "are not poor or anything. They're financially well-off." Although expressed in a different way, the link between visible minority status and power was clear in the words of another woman who explained that even if the numbers of Blacks and Hispanics increased, "The people who would still hold power back and would be in control would still be White."

Number in the Population

As pointed out by one student, visible minorities can in part be defined by the fact that "their number is comparatively smaller than the majority." While others shared this view, for most, as is evident from some of the points raised above, numbers alone are insufficient for the allocation of visible minority status. Indeed, the way in which the question of number was discussed in many instances suggested that number in the population was not a sufficient condition for minority status. For example, as previously noted, one Chinese woman felt that Chinese affluence disqualified the Chinese as visible minorities, even though their numbers are comparatively small.

Self Presentation and Cultural Assertiveness

Self presentation and cultural assertiveness were both given as rationales for visible minority designations far less frequently than colour, accent, power, and number in the population. Nonetheless, when group participants raised these criteria, they were not dismissed by other group members.

The issue of self-presentation was raised by one woman in the context of street people on Yonge Street. As far as she was concerned, implicitly because of their self-presentation (clothes, posture, etc.), such individuals were both visible and minorities, independent of matters such as colour. As she phrased her argument, "Even say the poor. These people are visible minorities."

Although the issue of dress was not discussed to any great extent, in more than one group the opinion was expressed, and accepted, that Orthodox Jews were visible minorities because of external characteristics. For example, one participant informed other group members that he "used to live in a section of Toronto where there was a large number of Orthodox Jews so the gentlemen would be walking on the street. You know that they were Jewish by their hair." Whether or not Jews in general could be considered members of a visible minority was raised in more than one group; however, because most Jews are White and relatively well-off financially, the issue was not clearly resolved.

Cultural assertiveness was the least mentioned basis for classifying individuals as visible minorities. When the issue was raised, it was in the context of groups making a claim for cultural distinctiveness. As explained by one female student in a discussion of Latvians, "now that the USSR is disintegrated, they tend to be more enthusiastic in letting other people know that they are different." It was not clear that this line of reasoning was either accepted or rejected by other group participants.

Self-Defined Minority Status

As stated earlier, focus groups were homogeneous in terms of how students self-identified in a number of surveys. As a result, it is important to note that when asked about visible minority status in the focus groups, those who self-identified as visible minorities in surveys did not always give the same response in focus groups. Conversely, students who had stated that they were not visible minorities in surveys did not in all cases maintain that position in the focus groups.

This finding, rather than invalidating the results of the survey, suggests that for many Chinese origin students beliefs regarding their visible minority status, however defined, have not crystallized. As a result, independent of how some students self-identified in surveys, discussion in the focus groups no doubt contributed to re-assessments of their own visible minority status. To this extent we might think of visible minority status as a situationally specific and variable construct for some Chinese students. More evidence of this possibility will be presented later.

CLEAR VISIBLE MINORITIES

When students were contemplating their own visible minority status, the various criteria that were used in the classifications of others were equally apparent. Among those who stated that they were visible minorities, colour and citizenship were cited as reasons for this self-classification. One female student simply stated that, "I have to say I'm visible because I'm visible." Consistent with a previously noted concern, a male student also was prepared to admit that he was visible but made it clear, "I don't imply there's any negative meaning on that." That citizenship may play a part in self-determinations of visible minority status was clear in the statement of one woman who said, "I'm not belong to this country because I'm a visa student here."

AMBIGUOUS VISIBLE MINORITIES

It was evident from the statements of many students that they were ambiguous with regard to their visible minority status. For some this was the case because they seldom considered their status; for others it was because of their affluence or power or because of their heritage. Frequently, there was over-lap between and among these categories.

One man who seldom thought about his visible minority status noted that when he did reflect, he suspected that he was a visible minority. A female student was less certain. She candidly stated that, "I really don't know which group, like, I belong to."

Displaying ambiguity based on affluence and heritage, when asked if she thought she was a visible minority, one woman replied, "I guess I'd say yes and no. No because we're getting an education here just as everyone else. But yes I feel I'm part of it [a minority] because of my parents. They're all from China."

For many students, being or not being a minority was a function of location. For example, one man argued that, "minority depends on which part of the city you go to. If you go to Scarborough, then you are not a minority." In a similar vein a female student pointed out, "when I going out to mall or anything, like going to the movies, many, many native around. I feel as though a Canadian, not Chinese." By way of comparison, she continued, "when I go to Chinese mall with my parent or stuff, then I'm a Chinese, 'cause I speak Chinese."

NOT VISIBLE MINORITIES

Those who did not regard themselves as visible minorities appeared to base their considerations on the facts that they were accepted by non-minorities, that they were affluent or had power, or a combination of both. Acceptance by non-

minorities was evident in the words of one student who considered that, "people that I work with, my friends, I don't see myself as being any different than they are." Although less obvious, the notion of acceptance also may be implicit in the words of a woman who summarized that, "I can enjoy living here. That's why I treat myself not a minority."

The previously noted importance of power in ascribing minority/majority status comes out clearly in the words of a woman who did not consider herself a visible minority. "When they call people this way," she said of visible minorities, "is when they find that this people don't have a power. Today," she resumed, "I'm receiving an education, I can speak the language. I don't consider myself a visible minority." Although the point was not pursued in the focus group meetings, it may be that for some students the mere ability to communicate in English confers a certain degree of power.

Friendships

It was noted in an earlier section that in the surveys students of Chinese origin who felt that they were visible minority members reported more visible minority friends than individuals who did not feel that they were visible minorities. Unfortunately, it was impossible to determine: if students who thought they were not visible minorities sought friends who were not visible minorities; if they were 'colour blind' when it came to categorizing their friends; or if chance association with non-visible minorities resulted in self-definitions as non-visible minorities. Similar concerns can be raised with regard to the friendships of self-defined visible minorities. While information gained through focus group discussions does not enable an answering of these questions, it facilitates comment on the nature of friendship groups.

Some group participants only had friends who were white. Others had friends of Chinese origin, some of whom would consider themselves visible, others of whom would not consider themselves visible. Perhaps most important in assessing how friends would classify themselves is whether or not group participants, and their friends, were born in Canada.

Evidence suggesting that birthplace may be an important consideration in assessing the self-identification of friends can be found in all groups. For example, one male student remarked that, "None of my best friends are Chinese. I mean, I grew up in Canada!" In another group a student who was raised in a small town with only two Chinese families noted, "I had no contact with Chinese people so I've always mixed with other people. When I'm around Chinese people," he confessed, "I feel pretty uncomfortable."

Frequently, the Chinese origin friends of the Canadian-born did not necessarily consider themselves visible minorities, particularly if they too were born in Canada. "Most of them [my friends]," one female student explained, "are born here and they don't consider themselves as a minority. They don't care what's happening back where they're from, because even their parents, some of them were born here too." Similarly, another female explained, "I don't think any of [my friends] would say they're part of the minority. When I go out with them, to the mall or whatever, they're fine, they think of themselves as Canadians and they act as themselves. They don't act differently," she concluded, "because they're Chinese or if they not Chinese."

By way of comparison, if students' friends were born overseas, it was more likely that friends would consider themselves visible minorities. "Some of my friends," one female student pointed out, "consider themselves minorities. It's just like her or him is a visa student. They're just feel hard to get into this society, so I think they consider them visible minority." In a similar way a male student reasoned, "I think part of my friend will consider themselves as a visible minority 'cause they thinks they feel more comfortable when they go to Chinese peoples' place other than go to a Canadian person." There was, however, an exception to the general sentiment found embodied in the words of these two students. One student commented that, "Non-Chinese people that I came across they are more open to me than Chinese acquaintances that I have known in this city."

Affirmative Action

As noted in the Introduction, particularly for governments, issues of visible minority status have become important in questions of equity and affirmative action. When such questions are discussed, it is assumed that 'visible minority' is a non-problematic term and that minorities defined in this way are possible to count. It has been seen from the evidence presented in this report, however, that this may be an unwarranted assumption, at least for some individuals of Chinese origin. But what of affirmative action itself? Is it seen as a positive objective for those it is presumed to help?

Answers to this question were discussed in the focus group meetings. Overall, it is fair to say that there was as much opposition to affirmative action for visible minorities as there was support. The reasons for opposing such measures included:

- Fear of backlash and reverse discrimination
- Belief in merit

- Self-esteem and/or ethnic pride
- Organizational consequences

In many instances there was overlap among the categories.

The only reason advanced in support of affirmative action based on visible minority status was related to racist hiring practices.

Fear of Backlash and Reverse Discrimination

Fear of backlash and a concern with reverse discrimination was raised by both male and female group participants. "The intentions of this type of equity are honourable," one man argued, "but what happens is there is backlash, there's no doubt about it." Similar sentiments were expressed by a female in another group. "I feel really strongly against that. This is one thing that's been bothering me, especially with the government. They think they're doing something good for multiculturalism, but," she cautions, "they have pulled on a really negative effect. You're gonna get reverse discrimination," she explains, "which in turn will fuel discrimination against us. You should be hiring on the basis of quality." She concludes, "I have to sympathize especially with the white males now, some of them are really feeling the effects of reverse discrimination." To another female, "Putting forth this type of legislation is like thumbing your nose at them and everything like that. This sort of acceptance has to come through education."

Belief in Merit

A number of concerns were raised with the possibility that affirmative action could lead to hiring on bases other than merit. "No! I say no," one man emphasized. "You should be chosen on merit totally. Because I don't want a doctor who is less qualified, and because he is a visible minority as a doctor, I don't want him to do anything to me."

Self-Esteem and/or Ethnic Pride

A number of group participants made comments from which it was possible to draw the conclusion that affirmative action would damage their self-esteem as both individuals and/or ethnic pride as individuals of Chinese origin. With regard to the former one woman argued that, "When you go to an employer, do you wanna be hired because you're good for the job or because you had 'the face'? For me," she explains, "I wouldn't wanna work for a company that's hiring me because I have face. I want them to hire me because I can do the job!" As an example of the latter another woman in the same group pointed out that, "Chinese people are hard working people and they are getting a pretty good reputation. That sort of respect," it is emphasized, "didn't come down with some kind of legislation from

government. That's something that was worked for. That's something that comes over time. It comes with hard work!"

Organizational Consequences

For some, hiring individuals on the basis of their appearance rather than their competence could have negative consequences for the organization. "You hire someone because you need to fill a quota," one woman pointed out, "you may create a long term problem." Indeed, some group participants could point to situations where bad results had derived from hiring individuals for reasons other than competence.

Racist Hiring

Among those who supported affirmative action, most did so out of concern with racist hiring practices. Nonetheless, even when this concern was raised, issues such as competence were not forgotten. For example, one woman reasoned that, "hiring should basically depend on your ability or the merit." Nonetheless, she also felt that, "I think law is good sometimes. Just like the Blacks, if you don't have that quota over them, like some of them can never get a good job." Another woman also supported affirmative action; however, she was also concerned with its potential negative implications. "I just don't want the others to think that we are the kind of people that need special help or special consideration, or special assistance; however," she concludes, "if we don't have this, this kind of consideration, we can never get into a position."

Conclusion

In recent years, the term 'visible minority' has come into increasing use. In addition, governments have taken steps to ensure equitable distributions of visible minorities throughout public sector organizations. Quite frequently, surveys are carried out to determine if organizations have appropriate representations of such groups. As a result, it is important that we be certain as to the meaning of the term.

From an analysis of students of Chinese origin at York University it is clear that we cannot assume a common meaning and application for the term 'visible minority'. Some Chinese origin students use notions of colour when deciding who is, or is not, a visible minority. Others use power, accent, or other criteria. More importantly, many Chinese origin students, and their friends, do not consider themselves to be visible minorities. Indeed, for some, visible minority has a negative connotation.

As visible minority means different things to different students, it is not surprising that they do not all support the objective of affirmative action for visible minorities. For some such measures would inspire backlash. For others affirmative action is contrary to their values of hiring on the basis of merit. For still others affirmative action can be viewed as an affront to their self-esteem or ethnic pride. Nonetheless, there are some students of Chinese origin who view affirmative action as a necessary measure.

To what extent are the beliefs and attitudes of Chinese origin students, who might benefit from affirmative action measures, common to other ostensible 'visible minorities'? At this point, we do not know. However, research on Black Canadians, Jamaicans, Caribbean Blacks, and Black Africans, is currently under way. Investigations are also being carried out with White Canadians of Italian and Portuguese descent. Once this information is collected and analyzed it will be possible to determine if the beliefs and attitudes of students of Chinese origin are typical or those of a well-educated and upwardly mobile group in Canadian society.

To what degree are Chinese students' views typical of individuals of Chinese origin in general? Although some of the individuals included in the groups were adults, we do not know the answer to this question. The provision of an answer would require the replication of the research outside of the university. Plans are also under way to implement this research objective.

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